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## Mindfulness and the Aloha Response

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### Abstract

In this article, we contend that an ancient, contemplative practice called mindfulness, often associated with the Buddhist tradition, shares much resonance with the indigenous wisdom of *Aloha*, the lifestyle and livelihood of Native Hawaiians. In fact, we propose that mindfulness is one tool and one form of mental energy that facilitates the discovery, recovery, and uncovering of the *Aloha* response leading to the experiential awareness and embodiment of *Aloha*. We also discuss how mindfulness in Hawai‘i can nurture individual and collective consciousness to respond with *Aloha*, thereby recovering the Native Hawaiian spirit on the islands. As they interact with clients and the community, social work practitioners in Hawai‘i can play a key, pivotal role in modeling *aloha* and encouraging others to engage with *aloha*.

### MINDFULNESS AND THE ALOHA RESPONSE

“We should be able to look for them (indigenous wisdom), define them—because nothing is lost. In fact, we still have a lot of knowledge that was left to us by our ancestors. It’s still there; we just have to go and look for it.” (Pualani Kanakaole Kanahele, 2005)

In this article, we contend that an ancient, contemplative practice called mindfulness, often associated with the Buddhist tradition, shares much resonance with the indigenous wisdom of *Aloha*, the lifestyle and livelihood of Native Hawaiians. In fact, we propose that mindfulness is one tool and one form of mental energy that facilitates the discovery, recovery, and uncovering of the *Aloha* response leading to the experiential awareness and embodiment of *Aloha*. We also discuss how mindfulness in Hawai‘i can nurture individual and collective consciousness to respond with *Aloha*, thereby recovering the Native Hawaiian spirit on the islands.

### ALOHA & THE ALOHA RESPONSE

Auntie Pilahi Paki was known as the “The Keeper of the Secrets of Hawaii.” The second author, at 13 years old, was asked by this esteemed elder who told him to learn



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how to think Hawaiian before he was to learn how to speak Hawaiian.” I want you to know Hawaiian thought. For if you think Hawaiian regardless of the language you use, it will be the language of *Aloha* and *Aloha* is the language which reveals the connection to all people.” Auntie Pilahi then shared this 1917 quote from Queen Liliuokalani and directed the second author to the last line. She said that most people interpret the last line to mean on earth there is a man and women and in heaven there is God. But there is a hidden message and with Hawaiian thought you can find the message:

“I could not turn back the time for the political change, but there is still time to save our heritage. You must remember to never cease to act because you fear to fail. The way to lose an earthly kingdom is to be inflexible, intolerant, and prejudicial. Another way is to be too flexible, tolerant of too many wrongs and without judgment at all. It is a razor’s edge. It is the width of a blade of pili grade. To gain the kingdom of heaven is to hear what is not said, to see what cannot be seen, and to know the unknowable – that is Aloha.” (Queen Liliuokalani in Quinn, 2009)

The message was to eliminate “sides,” and that within this context, it was implied that resolutions are more readily revealed. Auntie Pilahi also expressed that all Hawaiian words have three interpretations: *hoopukaku* (literal), *kaona* (symbolic), and *noahuna* (esoteric or spiritual). She said that most people can understand the first two but the *noahuna* was passed and taught to the learned ones, known as *kahuna*. In the *noahuna* was embedded Hawaiian thought and philosophy. She then proceeded to explain the Hawaiian thought behind the word *Aloha* and instructed the second author to practice and to find the *Aloha* responses in life. He practiced for the next 35 years before he shared what Auntie Pilahi taught him.

*Aloha* is made up of five words, with the following literal and symbolic translations:

- *Akahai*  
Grace, kindness to be expressed with tenderness
- *Lokahi*  
Unbroken, unity to be expressed with harmony
- *Olu’olu*  
Gentle, agreeable to be expressed with pleasantness
- *Ha’ha’a*  
Empty, humility to be expressed with modesty
- *Ahonui*  
Waiting for the moment, patience to be expressed with perseverance

Pilahi Paki, Keepers of the Secrets of Hawai’i (Shim & Taum, 2009)

*Aloha* also contains the meaning of presence in the breath (*alo* = presence in; *ha* = breath), highlighting the importance of the breath to anchor in the present. It is also a reminder that the breath as with everything only exists in the present moment, and one cannot have presence unless one is in the present moment.

Along with presence, the esoteric/spiritual meaning behind the five words of *Aloha* is that when you engage, you engage with white gloves, and gently, likely a baby, you don't bruise. So with white gloves and gentle touches, and in the right moment of emptiness, we engage to connect. That is the Hawaiian thought translation of *Aloha* –“as we go to the moment of **emptiness** we connect” (Wilcox, 2012). It is through connections that there is reverence and trust. And it is in reverence and trust that we are able to experience true relevance and honor for each other's presence and being.

The key aspect that is highlighted here is this notion of emptiness. What is meant by emptiness and emptiness of what? Here we may draw parallel to the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness. In the Buddhist philosophy, emptiness [*sunyata*] refers to the emptiness of all concepts, ideas, and perceptions, as well as the notion of self as a concrete, autonomous, agentic entity (Nagarjuna's seventy stanzas; Komito, 1987). According to Buddhist philosophy, the conventional self which we habitually identify with is merely a manifestation due to the phenomenon of dependent origination and co-arising. Yet by default, we mostly engage with others and in the world through our habitual filters of ideas, notions, and perceptions of this self.

Interestingly, this notion of co-arising and interconnection is reflected in the metaphysics of the Hawaiian religion of “kahunaism.” As a philosophy of everyday life stripped of rituals, “the essence of kahunaism is a deep and genuine reverence for life- living and becoming a part of everything around you” (Veary, 1989, p. 29). Nana Veary (1989) contends that “the underlying nature of the Hawaiian has always been gentle and strong in spirituality. These qualities were inherent in their culture, expressed in their everyday lives...in how they greeted strangers and revered their gods, in how they gave away everything, from food to land and even children” (p. 23). This way of being is the lifestyle of Hawaiians, but is also the lifestyle of all those who practice living *Aloha* and finding the *Aloha* response.

Let us provide an example here of the *Aloha* response in a more concrete and experiential way. In December 2013, the second author donated a kidney to his friend who was suffering from stage 4 kidney failure and rapidly declining health. In the United States, Hawai'i ranks last in organ donation yet is the highest state in terms of financial contribution/donation per capita. The National Kidney Foundation attributes this phenomenon to the Polynesian and Asian culture in which individuals of Polynesian and Asian heritage in Hawai'i will not ask and consistently refuse to accept living donor kidneys from family and friends. The suffering person struggles internally with putting another at risk during the procedure and for life. The sharing

of his kidney with his friend was the appropriate *Aloha* response. To find the response he went to the moment of emptiness, using breath to anchor in the here and now, and with grace and gentleness helped his friend to connect with the gift of his kidney. In his emptiness he acknowledged that the cultural observations were true however incomplete. To live *Aloha* is not to wait for someone to ask but to give before they must ask, and to know that his friend could never respond with a “yes” meant that he must help his friend to connect with the gift of the kidney by going through every procedure for kidney surgery and not requiring a positive acknowledgement of the gift or gratitude of any kind.

As the narrative depicted above, the *Aloha* response requires going to the moment of emptiness (a being state of deep silence and suspension of all notions) to obtain insight, and with white gloves and gentle touches, one engages in the right “pono” response in the right “pono” way. This way of responding, over and over, across different individuals, situations, contexts, become the lifestyle of right livelihood.

The challenge though is how to go to this moment of emptiness, to the reservoir of insight, and uncover the *Aloha* response? We suggest that mindfulness is one tool, practice and discipline with much empirical evidence and support to help manifest the *Aloha* response.

## MINDFULNESS TO TUNE INTO ALOHA

### What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is essentially the awareness that arises by paying attention, in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Accordingly, two key aspects of mindfulness include: 1) awareness of the present moment, and 2) a non-judgmental acceptance of this awareness (Bishop et al., 2004), along with the dimension of time (present moment). Others have also included metacognitive awareness and a decentering ability to step back and to see from a wider perspective (e.g., Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006). Collectively, this results in a dispassionate mindset that when sufficiently sustained, enables the individual to see things clearly and objectively, ‘as they are,’ without the usual mental and ego chatter (commentaries, thoughts about the past and future, self-evaluations, judgments) that often clouds perception and perspectives. Individuals are able to perceive and experience thoughts, feelings, events without clinging to or rejecting them, enabling greater equanimity. Most importantly, these experiences of thought, emotions, and sensations are experienced and recognized for what they are, as passing phenomena, rather than as something concrete of self. In other words, instead of being identified with one’s thoughts and feelings (I am a sad person), one is able to stand back and observe these thoughts and feelings dispassionately (the experience of observing sadness coming and going). Mindfulness could also be considered a form

of energy, “the energy that allows us to look deeply at our body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness and see clearly what our real needs are, so we will not drown in the sea of suffering” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2007, p. 15).

### Why & How Mindfulness for Aloha

In mindfulness, one is instructed to attune and attend to an object (e.g., breath, sound) as an anchor for a period of time. Focus and concentration are developed and are complimented by an open awareness stance of observing phenomena (thoughts, emotions, sensations) as they rise and fall, come and go, without attaching to the phenomena, and most importantly, attaching meaning to the phenomena as reflective of self. As mindfulness energy becomes steady, like a laser that has the concentrated beam of photons, it shines with intense clarity unto the phenomena revealing the true nature of reality. Within this deep stillness of insight, the *Aloha* response is revealed. Nana Veary (1989) encouraged getting into silence in order to connect as “silence allows you to tap the source of your being, the still, all-knowing center” (p. 29). In Native Hawaiian traditions and spirituality, there are practices that resonate with mindfulness in emphasizing the importance of breath, silence, and deep listening.

Support for mindfulness practices can be found in the word *Aloha* (presence in the breath) and even in the word Hawai’i. In fact, the Hawaiian word for breath is an essential part of the word Ha wai ‘i (James, 1994):

Ha meaning, breath or breath of life  
 wai meaning water, but also the root word for wealth  
 ‘i meaning supreme (p. 22)

Ha (breath) exercises are commonly emphasized as a way to tap one’s energy source and to connect deeply, to one’s essential nature and to others. There are however several variations of ha (breath) exercises each with a specific purpose (James, 1994; Kahn, 2004). Kahn (2004) described three traditional Hawaiian breath forms: Noho Pū is a passive meditative contemplation that opens the pathway to Hō’ike, enlightenment; ‘A’ala HĀ is an active meditative contemplation, uses repetitive o’ono chants to manifest personal desires and enhance health through revitalizing and toning the internal organs; and Ho’o mana, storing breathwork, is the third form that builds necessary mana, energy, and personal power to overcome life challenges (Kahn, 2004).

Ha exercises are marked by deep inhalation through the nose until one’s lungs are full, followed by exhaling through the mouth whispering the word ‘Ha-’ until one has fully exhaled (James, 1994). There are a variety of techniques described for conducting Ha exercises (James, 1994; Kahn, 2004) but they are usually conducted to calm the mind or to prepare oneself for another activity such as chanting or

meditation (James, 1994). The intention of these breathing exercises is to facilitate relaxation and stillness of mind, or to enhance health and well-being. This requires focus attention on the breath, and with an open, receptive, and patient attitude. One of the core components of mindfulness involves cultivating 'right' intentions including openness, acceptance/non-judgment, kindness, and compassion. One is instructed to engage whatever arises in oneself be it thoughts, emotions, sensations, even disturbing ones, with these virtues. Being virtuous, righteous is also consistent with what Native Hawaiians refer to as *pono* (Chun, 2006). To be *pono* is not to take from but to be a resource for others, and aligns with the *Aloha* response.

Similarities to mindfulness can also be found a special form of Hawaiian shamanistic meditation called *nalu* (King, 1990). In this context *nalu* means 'to form waves' and "the essence of the technique is a gentle, effortless resting of attention and awareness" (King, 1990, p. 193) which is exactly the instructions for the mindfulness practice. Consistent with mindfulness, simple forms of *nalu* also include closing one's eyes and paying attention to one's breathing, or concentrating on the repetition of a word or phrase, or holding one's focus on an object or an image (King, 1990). Other forms of *nalu* may include focusing on sight, sound, touch, or multisensory awareness (King, 1990). As such, one can see much resonance between Native Hawaiian breathing and meditative practices and mindfulness.

Native Hawaiian also have many contemplative/spiritual practices that highlight the theme of interconnections and inter-being which are salient in various mindfulness practices (e.g., deep listening, contemplative art & music, forms of martial art). The Native Hawaiian practice of storytelling, for example, is to connect through sharing emotional information, hopes, desires, and intention. As Brown (2012) stated: "stories reveal what people care about most; stories reveal how people perceive the world; stories point the way to insights; maybe stories are just data with a soul." In mindful storytelling, one engages both heart and mind to foster connections. The procedure of sitting in a circle in a group, council practice, is also a form of contemplative practice as is the hula or *ha'a* which facilitates deeply rich sensory experience via body movements. Being in the *lo'i* (taro) pond is a deeply embodied sensory experience. Practices of hula and being in the *loi'i* pond brings participants to focus on body sensations which can only exist in the present moment (i.e., the mind may wander to the past or future, but the body as is the breath only exists in the present). Embedded in this moment is also the felt awareness of connection to the land, to nature, and to one's ancestors and family lineage.

In sum, to be able to think Hawaiian requires a dedicated but effortful focus that becomes effortless discipline and practice to access a deeper level of awareness, at the level of stored consciousness of both our individual and collective humanity. It is thinking that is pre-conceptual, pre-verbal, and pre-language, and therefore is

beyond any one culture. Because many traditional/spiritual Hawaiian practices already share commonalities with mindfulness, mindfulness-based training, as a more structured and systematic practice, can be easily translated and adapted into Hawaiian communities, to help individuals and communities recover the *Aloha* response.

#### APPLICABILITY OF MINDFULNESS IN HAWAI'I

The evidence for the effectiveness and efficacy of mindfulness has been observed in more than 125 clinical trial studies ranging from chronic somatic diseases such as cancer, heart disease, and insomnia (Grossman et al., 2004) to mental and psychological issues such as anxiety and depression (Baer, 2003; Carmody & Baer, 2009; Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010). Neuroimaging studies are increasingly revealing how mindfulness can alter brain circuitry and processing to promote greater well-being by shifting processing away from cortical midline structures (associated with language and the narrative self, "me") to more right lateralized processing associated with sensory awareness and present-oriented experiential forms of self-awareness (Farb et al., 2007; Kerr et al., 2013); in other words, there is less stickiness in terms of associating thoughts and emotions to self. The take away message and implication thus far is that with mindfulness training, individuals are more able to increase their ability to pay attention and to focus, to observe and notice phenomena more objectively and from a more decentered perspective, and to better engage in self and emotional regulation. Overall, this contributes not only to greater ability to handle stress and the vicissitudes of life, but we also suggest, a greater awareness and the ability to discern the correct response that contributes to right livelihood (i.e., the *Aloha* response).

As a concrete example of mindfulness in Hawai'i, a feasibility trial of a mindfulness-based program was conducted in Hawai'i at the Hawai'i Youth Correctional Facility from Spring-Winter of 2013 (Le, 2014). Thirty-six youth, 75% males and 60% Native Hawaiian/Part Hawaiian, participated in a mindfulness-based training program that was conducted twice a week over five weeks. Data collected included survey measures on impulsivity, self-regulation, and perceived stress, as well as biomarkers (salivary cortisol to assess for stress, and SIgA to assess for immune functioning). After the mindfulness intervention, participants showed a significant improvement (at the statistically significant level) on stress (they reported lower perceptions of stress, and cortisol levels were also lower) and immune function (SIgA levels were higher). Personal reflections also captured significant self-awareness about themselves (insights into who they are), positive affect (happiness, calmness), but perhaps most importantly, their understanding of *Aloha*, and how mindfulness can help them live with *Aloha*. After the program, administrative staff at the HYCF was highly receptive to continuing the program, and even suggested that all staff receive mindfulness training.



The second author has also been traveling around all around Hawai‘i to share stories about the *Aloha* response. As he share his story and the deeper meanings of *Aloha* and the *Aloha* response the common reflection is not one of new understanding but a reaffirmation of what many in Hawai‘i know but possibly have forgotten in the aspirations of modern education and economics. A simple exercise he uses is to instruct everyone in the room that he’s going to ring a chime and he asks everyone to listen to the sound until they cannot hear the ringing and to raise their hand when the sound has ceased. He emphasizes that the exercise is not a competition but that the listener is simply notifying when the sound waves are no longer in their area. He then rings the chime and the participants are all focused on the sound like each person is a sensor. Usually the sound travels for 30 seconds before every person has raised his/her hand. He points out that at that moment the room is silent, focused, and ready to learn. He has reached a moment of presence with everyone.

This practice of listening with emptiness means to listen deeply, beyond words and sounds as symptoms of other causes and expressions, but to the place of connection. Finding connection requires moving beyond perceptions, concepts, and notions that often constrains and limits. It is the collective spirit of the islands of Hawai‘i and often referred to as the “*Aloha Spirit*.” The *Aloha Spirit* is an experience of profound relevance, a profound sense of belonging and in the belonging is the opportunity to share the relevance of each ones’ being, to a place of peace.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Being present in the breath allows one to embody presence, to go to the moment of emptiness and engage the *Aloha* response in order to connect. In Hawai‘i, many misunderstanding and execution of ideas have been missed due to the absence of the ability to think Hawaiian and to respond with *Aloha*. Although Hawai‘i still ranks as one of the most desirable places to live, there remain many issues such as homelessness and youth suicide, along with great disparity in wealth, resources, and opportunities that leave many individuals and communities disconnected and disenfranchised. Because of the large empirical support behind mindfulness, we suggest that mindfulness can serve as a tool to uncover and recover the *Aloha* response, to find the appropriate response in addressing many of the physical, mental, and social issues that currently exist in our contemporary society and world. In Hawai‘i, youth and adults of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ancestry continue to be disproportionately represented in many health and criminal justice statistics (e.g., substance use, diabetes, depression/suicide, and delinquency). This state of affairs cannot continue and our current way of being is certainly not sustainable.



Presently, Hawai'i is poised on the threshold of transformation, at the liminal state of truly manifesting *Aloha* and becoming a beacon for others. We propose that mindfulness can shine the light of *Aloha*, for individuals and institutions to discover and uncover the *Aloha* response, and to embody *Aloha* as a way of being, a lifestyle of wise and compassionate living. Engaging mindfulness to live with *Aloha* may in fact be a transformative, healing process as well a form of self-awareness and self-determination that can bring one back to one's true home.

Because social workers engage within individuals and communities across the various sectors of society, from juvenile justice to health and elderly care, they can play a pivotal and vital role in modeling the *Aloha* response to others, and as such, inspiring others to respond with *Aloha*. Opportunities to provide mindfulness training for social worker are needed, and this article is a first step to encourage development and implementation of mindfulness with *aloha* training for social workers.

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